

Rhetorics, Simulations and Games: The Ludic and Satirical Discourse of Molleindustria

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ABSTRACT

Oligarchy (Pedercini [Molleindustria], 2008) and Phone Story (Pedercini [Molleindustria] & Yes Lab, 2011) are two apparently simple games that integrate game-based and simulational components in a wider rhetorical discourse. It is reductive to consider these satires as simple “gamified” pieces: their use of simulations as well as ludic elements is functional to a political rhetoric that cannot be reduced to mindless escapism. Oligarchy is a piece raising awareness on the dependency of Western societies on oil. It simulates oil-extraction using mathematical models to describe the decline of production rates; it also employs game mechanics to confute the player’s initial assumptions and to propose a persuasive message. Phone Story is a playable satire of Apple advertising, simulating the “identity correction” genre adopted by political activists. This piece also features ludic mechanics to create a complex discourse enhancing its satirical effectiveness. These examples show the potentialities of an overlapping between simulation, playful elements and rhetorical persuasion - suggesting their mutual compatibility and stressing the need for further research in this area.

Keywords: Activism, Game, Identity Correction, Ludic, Persuasion, Politics, Rhetorics, Satire, Semiotics, Simulation

INTRODUCTION

The convergence between traditional texts and rich interactive media is a stable trend that is giving birth to new practices and discursive forms. Computer-based games and simulations have already entered the political discourse in different forms - such as Newsgames reporting on current events, Games for Change raising awareness on social issues or Advergames used in political campaigns. Besides these

relatively stable genres there are, however, other emerging practices combining simulations and game-related elements in the political arena. Paolo Pedercini, better known through his “Molleindustria” alter-ego, is a US-based Italian game designer and game scholar and he is one of the first authors to systematically cross-fertilize simple procedural simulations, game-based mechanics and the textual genre of satire. Specializing in social satires, he incorporates apparently simple “casual videogames” in his critical and political statements. His works are complex enough that it would be reductive

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to simply consider them as 'gamified' political pieces and they adopt simulations as well as game-related elements as integral parts of his political rhetoric without reducing them to simple entertainment. I will argue that:

- Molleindustria's rhetoric could not be reproduced in linear texts;
- Interactive segments in Molleindustria's pieces are schematic simulations that are simplified in some aspects but realistic and accurate in describing causal relations and ideological processes;
- The ludicity of those interactive parts is not just an aesthetic choice nor it aims at mindless escapism but it serves a specific rhetoric and semiotic strategy and contributes to the persuasive effectiveness of Molleindustria's work.

Molleindustria's use of simulations to present a political issue and of game-like interactions to build a critical argument will be examined in two recent pieces. Oiligarchy¹ (Pedercini [Molleindustria], 2008) is a Flash-based management game that represents oil-extraction corporations, critiquing their business model and their influence on world politics. Phone Story² (Pedercini [Molleindustria] & Yes Lab, 2011) is a satire of Apple's advertising developed by Molleindustria in association with Yes Lab - a design initiative that inspired some of the actions at the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011.

The arguments presented in these pages will touch on four points. In the first part, the context for Molleindustria's work will be detailed. Then, it will be discussed how Oiligarchy and Phone Story are part of Pedercini's political and critical discourse and are designed for rhetorical, persuasive and satirical purposes. In the third point, it will be argued that Molleindustria's pieces are also evidently ludic: when examined from a formal ludological (Juul, 2005) or game design-based (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) perspective they satisfy all the requirements for being considered proper computer games. In conclusion, Phone Story and Oiligarchy will

be recognized as complex objects that contain (amongst other semiotic components) ludic, procedural and interactive simulations of real-world phenomena.

MOLLEINDUSTRIA'S PRODUCTION AND ITS CONTEXT

As a first step, the field of free-to-play casual games will be briefly examined to contextualize Molleindustria's pieces. Casual games are products designed to be enjoyed in short sessions, without the need of detailed instructions, and are increasingly popular on several platforms – including mobile devices or even web browsers.

A considerable number of free-to-play casual games based on the Adobe Flash platform are available on specialized portals such as Kongregate.com or Addictinggames.com. On these websites, the "Political Games" category contains several simple titles – such as "Dress Up Barack" (Addictinggames.com, 2007) and "Dress Up Hillary"³ (Addictinggames.com, 2007) in which Obama and Clinton may be adorned with outrageous clothing. (Figure 1)

Differently from these simplistic political games, Molleindustria's titles integrate elegant game design solutions with non-trivial political messages, creating highly-praised (and often quite controversial) pieces. In brief, Pedercini's work stands out from the majority of political games because:

- Molleindustria's production offers focused critiques on a explicitly political level, presenting and developing arguments against specific ideological issues instead of simply making fun of public figures;
- His political argumentation is produced by embracing the potentialities of procedural media, as simulations and game rules are used for persuasive purposes instead of simply adding written text to an interactive experience;

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